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SUBJECT: NOTORIOUS SYUNIK GOVERNOR ACCUSED OF BEATING A TEENAGER

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(U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) The new Prime Minister ordered a political inquiry into opposition press allegations that the Syunik governor viciously beat a teenager after a skirmish with the governor's son. The probe was led by the governor's supervisor, the Territorial Administration minister, who unsurprisingly found no wrong-doing. The speedy exoneration of the infamous governor looks more like a whitewash than justice, and a lost opportunity to turn a new page in accountable government. END SUMMARY.

ARMENIA'S LAWLESS SOUTH

12. (SBU) On April 23 the pro-opposition Aravot (Morning) daily reported that Suren Khachatrian, the notorious governor (marzpet) of the southern Armenian region of Syunik, had beaten and broken the jaw of a 12-year-old boy in retaliation for an altercation the boy had had with the governor's son. Aravot said the family of the boy in question had chosen not to report the case out of fear of retribution by the governor. (NOTE: This is not the first such report about Khachatrian, who de facto reigns over Syunik as a feudal lord, or about his family. In 2007 the governor's brother reportedly attempted to rape a girl at broad daylight in a supermarket. END NOTE.)

13. (SBU) In a subsequent April 25 report, Aravot published an email that was sent to it by the father of the alleged victim who refuted Aravot's report, declaring that "not only there is no atmosphere of fear in the region under their most respected Governor, but all the residents live in a manner suitable for a citizen of most developed countries (sic)." After pledging to look further into the case, Aravot subsequently acknowledged in a published correction that they had incorrectly identified the real victim in their first report, and that his real age was 16, not 12.

14. (SBU) In subsequent reports, Aravot refused, however, to reveal the victim's true identity, citing concerns that the authorities could not guarantee the security of the victim or his family. Aravot reported that for this same reason the family of the victim had not applied to law enforcement authorities or sought medical care at a hospital. Aravot said it had also heard reports that goons affiliated with the governor were conducting surveillance of the victim's house.

THE NEW ACCOUNTABLE PRIME MINISTER

15. (SBU) In an unexpected move on April 25, at the first full session of the new government, Armenia's new Prime Minister Tigran Sargsian ordered Armen Gevorgian, his Deputy Prime Minister who also serves as Minister of Territorial Administration, to investigate Aravot's report. PM Sargsian said the government had to respond to media articles on issues of significant public interest. The prime minister's words suggested first that government should be accountable and responsive to public allegations of wrong-doing. However, there was also an implication that the government would set out to punish media outlets for allegations that the government decided were not credible.

INVESTIGATION RAISES QUESTIONS

16. (SBU) During the government's May 8 session, Deputy PM Gevorgian presented the results of his internal probe which found no misconduct by Syunik's governor, finding instead that the youth in question had hit the governor's son. According to Gevorgian, a special commission was formed to investigate the report, and its members visited the Syunik region several times to interview people there. As a result of its finding, the commission concluded that the paper had misrepresented the facts of the case.

17. (SBU) In a bizarre development, the commission initially met and X-rayed the jaw of the misidentified 12-year-old, about whom Aravot had already published a retraction. In the interim, Aravot's editor had been buoyed by the new PM's vow to investigate official misdeeds, and decided to share the identity of the real victim with the commission. Their editor said in a subsequent interview that Gevorgian's deputy had assured him the information would never be made public, but the information was nonetheless publicized in the

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commission's report.

18. (SBU) In spite of the fact that Aravot provided the commission with the identity of the real alleged victim, the commission limited its probe to interviews with the victim and his family, foregoing any X-rays of the correct boy's jaw. The boy's father reportedly told the commission on May 1 that his son had an argument and beat the governor's son, and that he later met with the governor to sort out their sons' differences. In issuing its findings, the commission claimed that there were no visible signs of injury on the boy in question. (NOTE: Weeks had already passed since the alleged beating by the time the commission visited the boy. END NOTE.)

THE UNPROTECTED VICTIMS

19. (SBU) On May 9 Aravot published an editorial that slammed the investigation and criticized the government for reneging on its promises. Aravot's editor wrote that one had to be crazy to believe that it was possible to get away with beating the son of Syunik's governor. He added that the paper had talked with the family of the battered boy in the presence of witnesses, and they confirmed that the governor had severely beaten the boy. Aravot alleged that the beating had jeopardized the boy's health, and that he had subsequently contracted bronchitis. They reconfirmed that the family forewent medical care at a hospital out of fear of retribution, relying instead on a doctor friend's assistance.

GOVERNOR AMBUSHED BY PRESS IN YEREVAN

110. (SBU) On May 13, Governor Khachatrian came under a media ambush at the National Assembly where he was attending a meeting with the rest of Armenia's 11 governors. Asked about the media reports of the alleged beating, Khachatrian said "Don't believe the rumors, I

don't think that any of you here is able to think that I could beat a child." When Radio Liberty's reporter insisted to Khachatrian that she had information corroborating the beating, but that the parents of the child were afraid of pursuing the issue, Khachatrian responded that "I don't think that the parents of the boy are so cowardly." When asked why he continued to be the object of so many negative media reports, Khachatrian said it was because people wanted to defame him. When reporters asked why he refused to pursue these cases for libel, he answered that he was tired of the rumors and not going to go after them.

ARAVOT REPORTER INTERVIEW

11. (SBU) The opposition AlPlus online news service interviewed Anna Israelian, the Aravot reporter who covered the case. She questioned why the authorities sent the commission to the wrong boy, x-rayed him, and included it in their publicized findings if her paper had published its retraction prior to the commission's dispatch to Syunik. She questioned why the commission chose not to x-ray the real victim. She said she was not surprised by the outcome of the investigation, as residents in Syunik are terrified to speak about the affair, fearing they could invoke the wrath of their governor. She said Aravot learned about the incident only through a third source, another indication of the level of fear in the region. Israelian said she nevertheless held out hope that the new government would eventually do the right thing.

COMMENT

12. (SBU) Syunik's governor has a long-standing, well-deserved reputation as a thug who rules the distant southern province with an iron grip. While we do not yet have firsthand information to confirm or deny Aravot's story, its interpretation of events makes more sense on its face than the official version. Although definitely anti-government in editorial slant, Aravot tends to be more reliable in its reporting than other opposition newspapers. We agree with the Aravot editorial that it strains credulity to believe that the governor's son was the victim of attack and that there was then no consequence for the ostensible aggressor. Far more likely -- indeed all too typical for Armenia -- is that the governor's son beat up another youth, and the local administration rallied to manufacture a version of events that blames the victim. The lack of a prosecution for libel also tends to corroborate the interpretation that the governor is lying. The ability of key figures -- governors, mayors, generals, oligarchs, as well as their sons, bodyguards, and retainers -- to beat up or even kill ordinary

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citizens with impunity remains both a human rights blot and cause for ongoing public anger at the entrenched elites.

PENNINGTON